

'Proprietary' Attitude Objectionable

U.S. Found Difficult Ally

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MUNICH—Ten years ago in Saigon I enjoyed the exhausting privilege of a long discussion with President Ngo Dinh Diem "on deep background," as our trade's jargon puts it.

The chief, though unavoidable, fault of reports on the Pentagon study is presenting only the American viewpoint. An Asian viewpoint during the critical year 1961 may give the revelations better perspective.

The theme of Diem's self-styled "expose" was the enormous difficulties of operating as an ally of the United States. He charged that Washington never possessed a mixed, or even tentative, policy, depending upon improvisation and reaction to events rather than devotion to long-term goals. He further charged that the State Department, the White House, the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, usually at odds, agreed only on rejecting his advice and requests.

Diem was, to say the least, controversial. Some explanation is, therefore, desirable before reporting his detailed—and often bitter—remarks.

Despite personal fondness for the doughty Diem, I was never his champion. Indeed, I suggested in print in November, 1961, that he must go if South Vietnam and the American interests there were to be preserved. He had, I felt then and still feel, become so isolated from his countrymen and so anti-American that he could no longer work effectively with the two chief forces that harbored hope of salvation: first, of course, the people of South Vietnam, and second, the United States.

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THE OVERWHELMING impression that emerges from Diem's "expose" is the "proprietary" American attitude. By no accident, the Pentagon papers also evinced the arrogance that made it impossible for the United States to deal with Asians as equal allies. Feeling that it alone knew best, the United States was incapable of leading a coalition. Instead, Washington attempted to drive the Vietnamese, judged they by inapplicable American standards, and ignored their advice.

Preoccupied by Laos just before Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's visit in spring, 1961, Diem said: "We do not understand what policy the United States wishes to apply . . . I told the Americans the French were sabotaging Laos . . . we wanted to build a road from Attapeu (in Laos) to Kntum (in Vietnam) because Route 9 (the axis of 1971's Laotian raid) was inconvenient. But (Lt. Gen. Samuel) Williams (chief of the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group) insisted the road wouldn't benefit Vietnam directly . . . The State Department told us: 'You Vietnamese

would try to use the road for aggressive purposes . . .'"

Supply routes, concentrated in southern Laos, were later the lifeline of the Communist attack. Diem asserted that Washington played deaf when he reported: "In 1959, the Communists began infiltrating southern Laos . . . when we notified the embassy of stepped-up guerrilla activity, they said we exaggerated. They said it was my new hobby to demand extra troops."

Diem added: "We must decide on one policy because it is fatal to all southeast Asians not to have a policy. The Laotians still depend on the Americans. We told them to move militarily, but the Americans are pushing everyone to suicide!"

Despite the hyperbole characteristic of the statements regarding Vietnam, Diem thus pointed out the strategic key to Indochina. Washington would not recognize that key for another decade.